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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000923

SIPDIS

AF/S FOR B. NEULING
NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR C. COURVILLE

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SUBJECT: "RESTORE ORDER", HUNGER STALK MASVINGO

Classified By: Ambassador Charge d'Affaires Eric T. Schultz under Secti
on 1.4 b/d

Summary

1. (C) Poloff's visit to Masvingo June 27-28 disclosed that the GOZ's Operation "Restore Order" was less onerous there than in Harare and other locations. However, opposition and NGO sources said hunger was growing in the region and continued food availability was uncertain. End summary.

Restore Order Milder Than Elsewhere

2. (SBU) On June 27, poloff observed that the informal vendor areas in Masvingo's central business district (CBD) and several vendor stalls along the main highway had been demolished. However, many vendor stalls were operating on the CBD's periphery and other locations throughout town. Some residences had been reduced to rubble but most residences of the apparent type demolished in Harare and Mutare remained standing. Crisscrossing high-density neighborhoods, poloff did, however, observe a few families living under plastic sheeting.

3. (C) Masvingo's MDC Mayor Chaimiti told poloff that when Restore Order got underway in Harare, police approached him on May 23 to suggest a meeting to discuss the operation's implications for Masvingo. They said they had not received instructions but wanted to minimize disruption to the city's business. Chaimiti told them that the city was trying to work out the vendors' relocation and had identified a tentative location on the edge of the CBD. They undertook to meet again May 26.

4. (C) Without warning, on May 25 the police removed all informal traders in a sweep through the CBD, according to Chaimiti. The police oversaw the demolition of the city's principal squatter neighborhood, which housed about 1000 in his estimation. He said that, unlike other cities, Masvingo had been strict over the years in not permitting construction of "backyard structures" being targeted in other cities, but police were requiring the demolition of chicken coops common in suburban neighborhoods.

5. (C) Chaimiti said that vendors had initially offered to front money for arrangement of an alternative informal vending area but police refused. A committee composed of the municipality, police, the district and provincial administrators, Ministry of Public Health officials and others had been conferring and recently agreed on an alternative site for the vendors. The city awaited money promised by the government for the construction of new commercial and residential stands. Chaimiti attributed the operation to the President himself and, echoing others, asserted that it was designed principally to pre-emptively crush growing urban unrest over declining economic conditions.

Food Situation "Very Bad"

6. (C) Chaimiti cast the food situation in Masvingo province as "very bad". He said all available meal in Masvingo was imported and its continued availability was uncertain. He also had received reports that distributions by the Grain Marketing Board in Zaka district had been withheld from suspected opposition supporters. Logistics to support distribution remained good but politicization reduced the total amount distributed, requiring those who received distributions to share with those denied.

7. (C) In a June 25 meeting with poloff, Sylvester Chin'anga of the Rural Unity and Development Organization, a local NGO, confirmed the Mayor's account of Masvingo's worrisome food situation. Supermarket shelves remained stocked in urban areas but prices were requiring families to consume less. He thought that locals' personal reserve stocks would run out by December or January, perhaps earlier, and the availability

and affordability of imports was uncertain.

18. (C) According to Chin'anga, the GOZ's Operation Restore Order already was further handicapping rural communities' food security. Instead of receiving remittances from family member vendors in the cities to buy foodstuffs, local communities were now just receiving unemployed vendors who used to remit. The communities would have more mouths to feed and less income. Many families had been cutting the number of daily meals. Chin'anga noted that school attendance, often a precursor indicator of growing food insecurity, was dropping in the region.

Comment

19. (C) The severity of Restore Order may vary from area to area, depending in part on the integrity, confidence and latitude of local police and their relations with local government officials. In Masvingo, the apparent rapport between the police and the Mayor, who won his May mayoral by-election unopposed, may have spared the city Restore Order's full brunt, but this appears to be an exception to the rule and even here there has been suffering. However, the bigger concern in Masvingo and elsewhere remains food security. In Masvingo rural and urban communities have enough to scrape by for now but nobody is confident they will a few months from now.

SCHULTZ